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ABSTRACT

Adult basic education (ABE) teachers are committed to understanding their students and to teaching something useful, something relevant, and something that will give students more control over their world or community. The goal of ABE teachers must then be to be familiar with their students' understanding of their world. ABE teachers are logically the best ones to define much of the content and most of the teaching process. Furthermore, ABE is being held accountable by governmental/political decision makers from an economic perspective, by both prospective employers and further education institutions, by the students' community, and by the further education centers' community. Bringing the community into the classroom has these benefits: effective learning, effective programming, better student attendance and retention, and mutual learning. Drawbacks to this approach include use of more teacher energy, poor student/teacher perceptions, and difficulty in evaluating adults' learning. (YLB)

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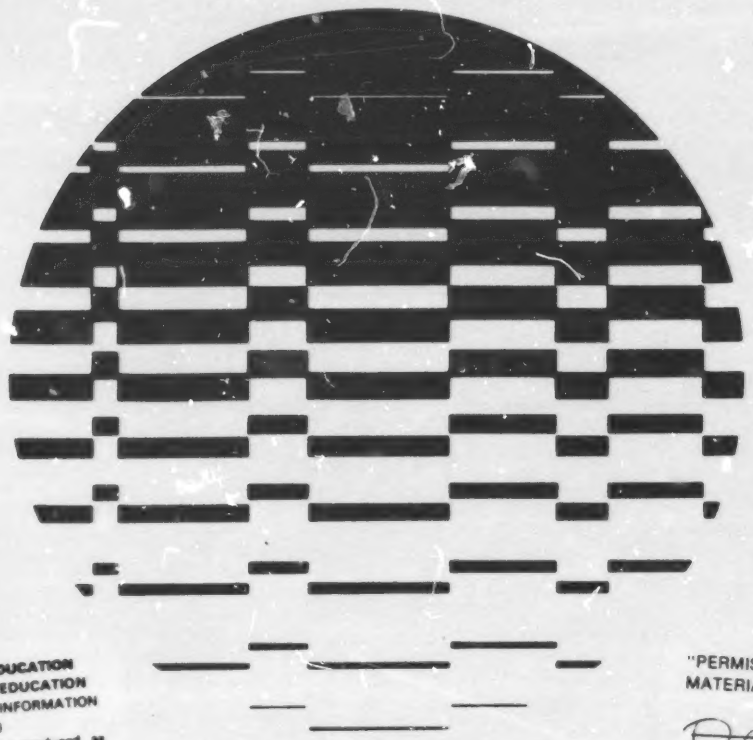

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ABE: Direction Through Community Relevance

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ABE: Direction Through Community Relevance

by Allan Quigley and Jean Oddgeirsson

Let's begin with the "heaviest" philosophical question possible--the crucial one asked most Monday mornings--namely: "Why would anyone in her (or his) right mind want to teach ABE?" This philosophical inquiry is often followed with its equally heavy corollary: "How much are they paying me to do this?" And what are our replies to our own questions? "I'll give it one more term, and that's it!" Or, "I'll get that 'so-and-so' to 'such-and-such' a level, and then I'm gone." The thing is, many of us have been saying this for several years. In fact, underneath the layers of rationalizing, procrastinating, and general grouchiness, there is but one reason: the students. To many this will not sound very profound. But, for many ABE teachers, it strikes a chord because, trite as it may seem, ABE teachers tend to be people who care about those they teach. So what is so special about teaching ABE?

The significance comes from the students. As ABE teachers, we have experienced the fact that ABE (including ESL) can change and has changed lives. We have seen ABE rebuild families, dignities, sanities, and actually save lives. We have seen a part of our society turn to us for help and, although we are quick to shrug it off, ABE and our concern can touch lives, families, communities, and yes, society, in a small sense. We teach because we care about our students. If this is an idealistic or romantic notion, then it is fortunate that a great

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many in this profession are similarly "afflicted." This "affliction" has grown out of years of first-hand experience for many of us.

We ABE teachers are committed to understanding our students--their needs, their aspirations, their hopes, their dreams, and their fantasies. We are trying to teach something useful, something relevant, something to give students more control over their world. In this, we are talking about a world as experienced by the students--a certain "community" as seen and conceptualized by them. The students' perceived "community" typically includes (but is not limited to) the students' family, neighborhood, workplace, and school environment. To work with our students is to become at least minimally involved with their needs and perceptions. To be even minimally involved is to be cognizant of their community, as they see it. We, thus, find ourselves in a pivotal position of influence. If it is the goal of ABE to enable our students to become more active, more empowered, in order to participate in their community or society at large, it must be our goal to be familiar with our students' understanding of their world. This does not merely mean a static knowledge of the geographic area students live in; it also means an empathy for, and awareness of, the students' own perceptions of their world. We must be able to see their community through their eyes as well as through our own.

The fact is that teachers reject, or try to reject, "outside" curricula--curricula meaningless or insulting to our adult students. By knowing our students, we have a good idea of

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the material that would make sense. Thus, we, not the "experts" are logically the best ones to define much of the content and most of the teaching process. We may not want to do this, but we hate it when someone gives an irrelevant or child-based curriculum to ABE. If we shirk our influential responsibility to help shape ABE, just "be about our business," we may find we have no business left to be about. We must help steer ABE since we best know the students' needs and perceptions. After all, who is in a better position? If we are not involved, how long do you think ABE will remain truly student-based?

To see the necessity of our having to take responsibility, first, think of ABE as something ephemeral--something that could vanish with the stroke of a politician's pen. Then, if you are familiar with the way funding priorities have been made in the political sector over the past few years, you will know that those programs demonstrating direct job or economic success are on the funding rise. Those that cannot be held "accountable" along economic lines--that is, those that cannot justify dollar input for dollar output--are dropping on the great funding thermometer. Thus, we are being "evaluated" by the governmental/political decision-makers from an economic perspective. But that is not all: we are also being evaluated by, "defined" by, both prospective employers and further-education institutions. They, in turn, have an impact on political decisions. If we in our profession are not in touch with, or are not meeting the expectations and criteria of employers and training programs, our students' failure will rightfully be judged as our failure in ABE. We can hardly take

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the position before the decision-makers that we were slaves to an irrelevant curriculum and were helpless to either change it or make it useful even though "we knew better."

Along this same line, what about the students' community? Our students' families, peer groups, and associates in the community also watch and evaluate. They, at the very least, evaluate to see if the students' time was wasted and if our program is "worth anything." We are at least as accountable in the students' community as we are in the employers'. We are as accountable in the further-education centers' community as we are in the political decision-makers' realm. We are evaluated at all four levels.

Sound overwhelming? Is everyone defining us except ourselves? Surely we, as the ones closest to and best informed on those whom we are serving need to help set direction. But how? Where do we start, and will we still have time to "teach"? Quite simply, we cannot keep ABE <u>basic</u> unless we do involve these four realms. "Teaching" through community direction is the fulfillment of these expectations.

Let us review this again in pragmatic terms: to address student needs is to be aware of their "world" or community. To actually make subject matter useful, we need to work at making learning relevant; relevant to students' <u>views</u> and <u>needs</u>. But at the same time, we also need to clearly picture the game's "score-keepers." We must know who we have to interact with, for our students' sake, and for the sake of our profession. Graphically, this may appear as a cube. Beginning with our <u>purpose</u>, as

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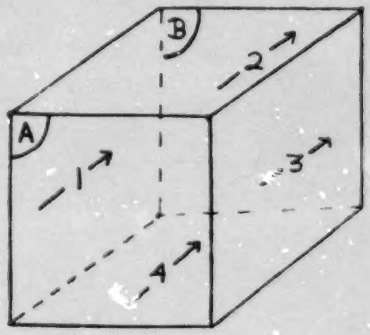
depicted on the front (Side A) of the diagram below, is our student-based "philosophy." As a profession, we need a goal to reach. Let's say this is the future sixteen years away: the year 2000. In other words, let us see if we can survive for another sixteen years. This is the back of the cube (Side B). To move from conviction to goal, we need to keep four key communities in mind (in no particular order for purposes of the diagram), and base our teaching and our program relevance on these:

1. The everyday community of our students. We must be aware of its expectations and make-up, through our students' eyes as well as through our own informed view.

2. Employers, as seen by students and through our own informed view.

3. Further-education opportunities/institutions as seen by our students and through our own informed view.

4. Funding decision-makers as seen by us, and as they see us.



Thus, in addition to relating to students', employers', and training centers' communities, we must include the decision-makers. We must include decision-makers for survival. Like it or not, we must correct misconceptions about ABE with those who hold the purse strings. Often we are evaluated by this group, possibly with input from the others, on the basis that we should achieve employment for all of our graduates, just as a high-tech program might. In fact, this is an unfair, unrealistic criterion. Even if there were enough jobs to go around (and there aren't), even if our graduates would accept those jobs

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(and they all won't), even if they could hold those jobs (and they all can't), some don't want a job in the first place. So are we a failure? In the sense that we have not told our story, yes, we are failing. We need to include the decision-makers because, if we can keep ABE relevant to our students and to their communities, and demonstrate that this is in fact the proper criterion for evaluation by decision-makers, we can defend ourselves on grounds familiar to, and germane to, ABE.

Let's now back up and examine the role of the teacher in ABE. Let's take a look at the pros and cons, on a working basis, of what is involved in keeping ABE on track, on the basis of community accountability.

It must be kept in mind that bringing the community into the classroom has both its own benefits and its own inherent disadvantages as well. Among the benefits are the following:

Effective Learning. Many of the students who come to adult literacy and basic education programs have not been served well by institutions. Alienation often occurs because learning is often framed in terms of institutional norms and processes. Teaching math, grammar, or science are institutional abstractions suggesting that subject matter, abstracted from daily life, are the goals of the institutions. Adult educators know that adults bring experience in o the classroom, that they are goal oriented, and that they are characterized by their practicality. Thus, the very fact that adults bring a life-world into the classroom allows us to integrate this information into the learning. Students need to become part of the process, part of the content.

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Effective Programming. Adults come into the classroom with concrete problems that rise out of their daily experiences. By integrating math, science, and grammar into experiences that they know, learning has greater meaning. Adults can learn to interpret their own experiences more broadly through discussions with other students--by applying new knowledge to those individual and collective experiences. Building up knowledge based on known experiences and facilitating our adult learners' ability to interpret and make decisions about these experiences is fundamental. It is the basis of adult basic education.

But besides the classroom itself, bringing the community into the classroom has program benefits external to the daily teaching/learning transaction. For instance, local programs can benefit as the interaction between school and community agencies increase. In keeping the community as our basis, community leaders who see community issues reflected in school curricula are more supportive of the schools through referrals, public relations, and possible cooperative programming. The funding agencies benefit if the funded program helps adults in the community. Community support for the program increases and the community at large becomes part of the learning process.

Attendance and Retention. Adult students are active in the learning process by bringing their community, their "stock of knowledge" into the classroom. They can build on this with a relevant curriculum they have some input to. However, they often do not feel that what goes on in school is part of their daily life. With the community at the center, they learn to solve problems. They gain confidence in interpreting their

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experiences. They become "satisfied customers," which helps improve attendance and retention. Students will only stay if it's a place worth staying at.

Mutual Learning. If students are encouraged to bring their community needs into the classroom, they become responsible for the quality of their learning. Adults learn how to seek out resources, lead discussions on issues, and feel good about what they know. Teachers can learn from their students since many have been trained mainly in subject matter. Thus, students and teachers learn from one another in a more collegial atmosphere. This shows greater respect for adults who may not know how to read but hold graduate degrees in survival.

We should not, however, think that bringing the community into the classroom is without its own drawbacks; among the disadvantages of this approach are the following:

More Energy. Does teaching through community direction honestly take more energy than grinding through lesson plans? Does student enthusiasm not help stimulate the class? Does it necessarily take more energy to involve participants? Maybe at first. There are many ways to expend energy. Relevance should create it in the classroom.

Student/Teacher Perceptions. Students and teachers have been conditioned to teach and to learn in traditional ways. Insecurities can arise for both if the structure is altered. Adult students need to be "deschooled" since they are quick to accept the role of passive learner and subject-oriented curriculum. They are quick to take the "I'm not OK" stance.

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Evaluation. It is more difficult to provide the standardized assessment of adults' learning when the curriculum departs from tradition. If learning is to occur differently, so then must evaluations. We have suggested that adult students can provide the experiences through which learning can occur, they can also provide the experiences most relevant to demonstrate what and how they have learned. And, finally, they can play a part in determining if it is truly effective.

About the Authors

Allan Quigley is on a one-year educational leave from his position as Co-ordinator of Community Colleges for the Covernment of Saskatchewan, Canada. He is currently working on a doctoral degree at Northern Illinois University and, along with co-author **Jean Oddgeirsson**, is a field consultant for the Northern Area Adult Education Service Center.

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